

PRESIDENT'S LETTER | TROY ELANDER, MD

# Once a Doctor, Always a Doctor

Being a physician is a part of us that will never go away **BY TROY ELANDER, MD**



**M**Y DAD, astute physician that he was, has dementia. As difficult as it is to write that about this man whom I've looked up to my whole life, and practiced with for 20 years, I continue to learn from him even in this process. Despite his dementia, he still thinks as a doctor. Aides will enter his room to assist with the bed sheets, and he'll mumble to me that they should have their intraocular pressure checked. With his form of dementia, he has hallucinations. He recognizes they are hallucinations and is fascinated by them. The

other day he told me of all these people lined up outside of his rest home and how he had to "get to it" and start examining them.

It seems this identity of being a doctor gets woven into our make-up. As my dad forgets so much of his life, his sense of self as a physician remains.

I like to visit him on days when I perform surgery. His eyes often glaze over, as he can't recall who has visited him that day or even whether he has eaten breakfast. But when I tell him of my cases, the subtleties of a particular maneuver, or send along good wishes

from a long-time patient or colleague, his eyes light up. I can see the love of profession and, even though he can't express it to me, I know this "medical talk" reaches an essential core for him.

Sad as it is to see how this brilliant man has changed with age, I find comfort in seeing a spark of his old self, which comes from talk of medicine. I even feel a bit of pride that when so much else leaves, this is what remains. There's something so fundamental to this privilege we are given as physicians. Those oaths, which we took so long ago, are something we carry with us forever.

Carving out time to lecture, to travel, to write, to counsel patients after office-hours are part of our profession. We are not compensated for this but it is part of the reward, part of the core. It's an attitude of trying to solve problems, to help others, to work together for a common goal, to respect the past and learn from it but to have an open mind to the future and its inevitable improvements.

Once a doctor, always a doctor... It's a life and mind-set we take on early and never relinquish even as other things slip away. It's bigger than health care reform, and electronic medical records, and RAC audits, and the rising cost of office overhead. It's fundamental—a sense of duty, of obligation, and a curiosity about how things work and how they can be improved. Despite the frustrations, the core remains the same—there's a reason medical school applications continue to grow.

And so my dad, who graduated medical school in 1954, will keep hearing from me about all the latest—the latest in the office, the interesting cases, the old patients who eventually become old friends, and even what is happening in organized medicine with the Los Angeles County Medical Association and the California Medical Association. When asked a few years ago how he would define himself, he replied, "I'm a doctor." I'll try to keep feeding that part of him, his definition of himself.

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